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Obituary: Cornelius Castoriadis (1922–1997)

Anarchist Communist Federation

1998

Cornelius Castoriadis was born Kornelios Kastoriades in Istanbul to a Greek family. Growing up in Athens he joined the Young Communists in 1937 and the Communist Party in 1941. During the war he read “several books that had miraculously escaped the auto da fes of the dictatorship: Souvarine, Ciliga, Serge, Barmine”. He joined a group on the extreme left of Trotskyism, and was involved in the resistance to the German occupiers. At the end of the war he was physically threatened by both fascists and Stalinists, forcing him to leave for France. Here he joined the French section of the Trotskyist Fourth International, but broke with it in 1948. Along with Lefort and Lyotard, he helped set up the Socialisme ou Barbarie group, (S ou B) initially made up of ex-Trotskyists and ex-Bordigists, often writing in its paper of the same name under the pen names of Pierre Chaulieu or Paul Cardan. He broke with Leninism, thinking that the revolution could be made only by the workers themselves, not by the party. Workers’ councils would be set up in the early stages of the revolution. He did think that some form of revolutionary organisation would be essential, uniting

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the revolutionary forces, and that once the revolution began, the revolutionary organisation would have to fight inside the organisation of councils to stop possible Leninist take-overs. Similar ideas are expressed in an ACF pamphlet *The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation*.

In the first issue of *S ou B*, the group denounced the Trotskyist characterisation of the Soviet Union as a “degenerate workers state”. They developed this in No 2 and 4, applying a Marxist critique to the Soviet Union itself, saying that the Party bureaucracy had collectively taken over the means of production and surplus of labour. By 1960 they were saying that the fundamental contradiction of capitalism, defined as the need to reduce workers to simple order-takers opens a crisis which touches every aspect of life. From 1964, in No 36 up to the last issue of the paper No 4, Castoriadis definitively broke with Marxism.

The *S ou B* group exerted their influence outside France with *Correspondence* in the USA, *Unita Proletaria* in Italy, and the *Solidarity* group in this country. Indeed, *Solidarity* published many works of Castoriadis under the name of Cardan, and he influenced many libertarian socialists and anarchists. The influence of the group was apparent also in May 1968 in France, even though the *S ou B* group had dissolved 2 years before. As D. Blanchard, a former member wrote in *Courant Alternatif*, paper of the *Organisation Communiste Libertaire* “...The activity of the group was not limited either to a critique of Stalinism or the publication of a review. On the theoretical level, the analysis of the bureaucratic phenomenon in Eastern Europe found its echo in that of the bureaucratisation of workers organisations-unions, parties- and in the bureaucratisation of the vital organs of capitalism, the State, business corporations. To this study largely contributed... the daily experience of comrades in the workplaces. Finally, very conscientially, we were preoccupied with enlarging the field of political analysis in extending it, as had already been done by the workers move-

ment in its most fertile moments, to the situation of women, of youth, the content of work, education, urbanism, leisure, consumerism, cinema etc.”.

In his last period, Castoriadis directed himself towards philosophical investigations, to psychoanalysis. In this period, his lack of knowledge of current social events and movements led him towards a tentative defence of the West – because struggle still remained possible within it- against Stalinist imperialism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union he revised his ideas, returning to a critique of market capitalism and globalisation. However, whilst he was full of sarcasm for the bosses and the madness of the system, there was a distinct streak of superficial sociology in his writings. When asked whether the work abandoned by *S ou B* should be taken up again, he replied that, in the absence of a social movement that took on the critique of capitalism in its most modern forms, this was not possible!

The best of Castoriadis’ thought lies in his radical libertarian vision which puts at the centre of a critique of capitalism, not economic laws or a fatal contradiction leading to its collapse, but the action of people attempting to take back their lives at every level.